

## Starbucks Pilot Program Recycles Cups into Napkins

By Leon Kaye | June 30th, 2010



Will Starbucks really increase recycling? I admit I have a slanted approach to this story. I have met too many single mothers and college students who have relied on employment at Starbucks to keep their families on a health insurance plan or to put themselves through school. Now, I know many peers who rely on a clean, quiet Starbucks store to start a new business via their laptops or search for employment, thanks to Starbucks' (now unlimited) WiFi access.

As a road warrior sales executive in a past life, Starbucks provided a safe haven between business appointments, or a place to dry out when caught in the rain. The notion that Starbucks mows over independent stores is nonsense: more coffee stores exist because of the Seattle icon, not despite of it. Plus, in a nation beset by growing health problems and an obesity epidemic, I am pragmatic: I am all for an addiction to caffeine over one to fried foods.

Nevertheless, I still wince when I order a Starbucks coffee, knowing that those cups cannot be recycled. I admit I always stuff the java jacket into my back pocket or into a briefcase to ensure it will be recycled at home, but I know that token effort is not enough. And, even if those cups are made from 5% or 10% or 20% post-consumer content, I know that means the rest of the cup comes from pre-consumer trees. The waste is especially ridiculous when I order an espresso that comes in a cup that can carry 20 shots with room to spare. Finally, the fact that shareholders voted down a recent initiative to step up recycling efforts is more than disappointing—it's irresponsible. But there may be hope that Starbucks will solve its trash problem: its Chicago stores will start recycling used cups.

This fall, stores in the Second City will start sending used cups to a Green Bay, WI, paper mill, where a Georgia Pacific facility will turn them into napkins. The program will start small but is a significant step to address the company's devouring of 3 billion paper cups and 1 billion plastic cups annually. Starbucks wants recycling at all of its stores by 2015 and the company's leadership is focusing on two approaches: first, recycling bins at all of its stores, and second, finding a market for all those dirty cups that otherwise end up in a landfill.

The issue is not entirely Starbucks' fault: restaurant managers often resist change, partly because the industry endures high labor turnover, which makes rigorous training expensive and time-consuming. The As You Sow Foundation, which led the failed shareholder proposal, is impressed with this latest step, and acknowledges that finding a market for used paper cups while dealing with municipal waste procedures that vary from city to city is a huge challenge.

Many environmental activists and eco-conscious consumers will still not be impressed with Starbucks' latest move. Downstream recycling, such as turning cups into napkins, still means the consumption of resources, including energy. The best solution would be for everyone to bring their own cup, and Starbucks could leverage its brand loyalty by encouraging its customers to do so. But disposable packaging has surged since the 1950s and will not disappear overnight, so a step taken is better than a step back.